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RETREAT FROM POETIC IDIOM IN RECENT LITHUANIAN AND RUSSIAN POETRY

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The more we love our Fatherland —
The less, in turn, it likes us!
That's what I said on one fine day
And haven't yet changed my mind.[1]

Let us describe "poetic idiom" for our purposes as a particular system of stylistic devices differentiating it from the idiom of prose. We have in mind a style dominated by the use of metaphors, enriched with symbols, multileveled, modestly hiding its naked truth behind some rhetorical cloud of obscurity, a style that does not tell a story so much as it conveys a state of being, and above all — a style suitable for changing reality into an image dedicate to the service of beauty.

In past years in the Soviet Union, the ideal of beauty itself was placed in service to Socialist realism and thus ultimately made to serve the ugly mistress of tyranny. In recent decades, a number of Soviet poets turned away from this traditional poetic idiom and its repulsive beauty, and in effect abandoned the very myth of beauty itself. This led to a minimalist poetry, often but necessarily laconic, and deprived of most poetic devices. From my own perspective, as a Slavist interested also in Lithuanian, I would like to take a brief look at one or two Russian and Lithuanian poets contributing to this trend. However great might be the desire to distance ourselves from all things Russian, the fact remains that both nations have been drawn into the same vortex of recent events, and the phenomenon of this "unpoetic poetry" is to some measure a common response to the challenges of the moment in whatever remains of the Soviet Union. One might say that if, in the tradition of socialist realism, beauty knelt at the altar of power, now both are being threatened by obsolescence. In fact, this trend is but a partial manifestation of a very important phenomenon extending far beyond the realm of art and encompassing all the upheavals that are now shaking the desperate empire — and that is the retreat of the people of all nationalities, including the Russians, from the myth of the Soviet state.

The Russian literary critic Mixail Epštejn, in a series of articles on Russian poetry of the nineteen seventies and eighties, developed a theoretical premise to describe it. It consists of two notions, "conceptualism" and "metarealism." This is how Epštejn explains conceptualism:

> Almost every work of art ... is conceptual to one degree or another, because it contains a conception, or a sum of conceptions, which can be discovered by a critic, a theoretician or an interpreter. Now, in conceptualist poetry this very conception is demonstratively separated out from the living artistic texture and becomes an independent piece of work, or "concept." Instead of "a work of art with a conception" we now have "conception as a work of art."[2]

The second notion, "metarealism," is more complex. In opposition to conceptualism, it strives for a maximum complexity of poetic language, and especially for an increased complexity of the very concept of reality. "Metarealism," says Epštejn, "is the realism of many realities tied together by the unbroken continuity of inner transitions and mutual transformations" (Epštejn, p. 198). Because of these constant transitions, the duality between metaphor and reality disappears — no things can be compared to each other, because they *become* each other in the poet's creative eye. Metarealist poets have indeed produced wonderful works, impossibly complex, but also somehow intensely clear in their truthfulness: their kaleidoscopic vision before us is, we know, what *has* to be; reading them, we become convinced that reality in its true complexity cannot be anything else.

For the present, however, let us remain with the conceptualists. Under the Soviet conditions, what Epštejn has called "the living artistic texture" sometimes turned into a mere fabric of lies, Aesopian fables to protect the truth, or the "concept" of what the poet had really meant to say. When the cocoon became transparent, the effect could be quite chilling. One poet, Dmitrij Prigov, described the condition of such a conceptual poet with a bright-eyed clarity:

The raven-bird hangs high in heaven
The dead man looks up from the ground
They stare each other in the face
They see each other well—right through
Whatever is there in the middle
Oh, you, my dearest native land,
You keep me here to be a bard
Between the raven and the corpse.**3**

Actually, this little piece is not altogether artless, even in the traditional sense. There is a living intertextuality in it — a transparent hint at Immanuel Kant and the categorical moral imperative that he discovered in the middle of the night, with the stars above and the graves below. If so, then Prigov's concept itself exists in the moral dimension and speaks of the need of the poet to remain transparent to truth, that is to be truly himself.

In Lithuanian poetry, Marcelijus Martinaitis made such conceptualist discoveries about ten years before Prigov, many of them in the cycle called "The Ballads of Kukutis." For Martinaitis, however, the imperative to be yourself comes not so much as a concept, but rather as a basic existential experience. In one of the poems from this cycle, he says, for instance:

Kukutis looks —
and sees Kukutis.

Kukutis listens —
and hears Kukutis.

Kukutis speaks —
and understands,
Kukutis is speaking.

Kukutis sits on a bench
and feels,
that there's Kukutis sitting on the bench.

Kukutis walks along
and his steps
come from him, himself,
and what he sees comes from himself,
and what he thinks.

And so, there's Kukutis, goes on living
and knows
that Kukutis lives,
that it's good for him
to be himself.

And Kukutis understands:
he is full of Kukutis,
and he feels good.**4**

Martinaitis also has something in common with another Russian poet thought to be a conceptualist, Vsevolod Nekrasov. Nekrasov sometimes writes truly minimal poetry, consisting, say of a single word in the middle of the page that says "nothing," or even of just a dot at far right, bottom. A dot left to itself can only be a concept, like a zero would be, or infinity, and "tout le reste," as Verlaine once said, "est litterature." Mostly, however, his laconic verse serves as a plain container for almost infinitely expandable implicit ideas. Here is an example:

It cannot be
My God

This
cannot be

And if this can be
My dear God

And I am
Also
Yours **5**

Expressions like "my God" or "this cannot be," left to themselves, are dowdy commonplaces with a minimal semantic load. But here they are used in conjunction with a very private, and in that sense unique expression "and I am also yours" that, in relation to God, can only be a prayer, a plea for protection and a surrender to God's will. In this context, the unspoken

question "what cannot be?" becomes truly ominous, and it is not hard for our imagination to fill its void with all the horrors of stalinism, war, or with any possible ecologic catastrophe that, together with prosperity, waits for us around the corner.

Martinaitis achieves a similar semantic structure in another one of his ballads:

> Have I got a cabin —
> with two ends.
> I look out one end —
> the sun is rising,
> I look out the other —
> the sun's down already.
>
> ___________
>
> At one end —
> I dance with the young'uns
> and at the other —
> my teeth fell out.
>
> Have I got a cabin —
> with two ends:
> at one end —
> I walk around quick,
> and at the other —
> I lay down dead.6

Here the structure creates a time-space continuum that extends the little hut to an individual's and, by implications, everybody's personal universe and thus it becomes in itself a universal idea. Martinaitis, however, has his Kukutis perfrming a role, wearing the costume of a peasant *racanteur,* while Nekrasov has no such mask, and his persona is neutral, not tied to a particular style of talking.

On the other hand, the conceptualists, according to Mixail Epštejn, are also interested in non-ideas, or pseudo-ideas that clog our language and civilization together with all the pollutants it has produced. This has to do, says Epštejn:

> with the tendency of language itself to produce cliches and stereotyped value judgments while it is exploiting us, our organs of speech to fill the world with ephemeral meanings and pseudomeanings. Conceptualism is a sewer system that carries all this cultural garbage to texts that are like cesspools — a necessary part of a developed civilization, where the garbage can be separated out from non-garbage. (Epštejn, p. 197).

The Russian poet Nikolaj Karpov has illustrated this premise very effectively in a veritable hymn to a trash-burning plant not only as an epitome of our civilization but also as our only human hope:

> The son of a latter-day constructivist,
> All of white bricks and of black metal,
> You rose all by yourself on a clear field
> Where only snowstorms flew before.
> O, you, trash-burning plant,
> The trusty substitute for tens of dumpsites!
> I knew and I believed: time will call you
> Without a doubt, to come to its assistance
> Gigantic dandy, dressed up to a T,
> You are indeed the creature of our time,
> From piles of refuse — the bane of future years
> Do save mankind while yet it's not too late.
> Just look: the forests are already full of trash,
> The swamps are all filled up with empty bottles,
> By the decisive stroke of airplanes' vapor trails.
> Work hard, do not allow that future should now perish,
> The trucks bring down your "food" from every corner—
> Grown in your iron voice and take from the transmission
> belt
> All rags and packages, and all the broken dishes.
> And take a chance on me: make me your helper,
> If only for a time, for I, alas, am not eternal.
> But I do feel that you and I are well related
> And this is why I've turned you to a human.
> I suffer from a passion, secret and incurable —
> I've tried so long, be it not very well,
> To bum the trash of petty, worthless feelings, As you have burned the garbage of the city scene.7

Karpov ends the poem with a plea that his words should burn like a searing bright flame to burn out all garbage from the soul, so that, as he puts it "any fool would become convinced/ that life has value only when it is spiritual."

The topic of ecology also plays a very important role in Lithuanian poetry. Such outstanding artists as Sigitas Geda, Albinas Bernotas, Janina Degutytė, Algimantas Mikuta and Marcelijus Martinaitis all have written in the past with sorrow, despair and hope about the rape of their native land by the barbarian onslaughts of modem industrial civilization. The young generation of the eighties is continuing this theme, but there is not much of the sort of naive optimism tinged with

irony that contradicts it that we see in Karpov. Instead, the young poets are angry and direct and see very little hope, if indeed any at all. A typical poem in this respect might be one by Stasys Anglickis, called "The Halo of the End":

> Such is the halo of the end —
> the fish are choking in the Northern
> Sea, are gasping in the river Nemunas —
> their convulsions cramp their gills.
>
> The victory of man,
> in the struggle for survival —
> the start of the death of nature,
> the wake of the suffering soul.
>
> The chimney mouths are vomiting
> sulfur, smoke, pollution,
> the green of the forests is dying,
> with perishing silver springs.
>
> The swallows, the blackbirds have vanished
> the cuckoo no longer gladdens the heart,
> you can only clench your fists against
> the end, the suicide of the human race.
>
> How shall I look
> at the perishing sky,
> how shall I bring a flower
> to the buried Nemunas river?[8]

Another Russian conceptualist, Lev Rubinštejn, weaves a sort of magic carpet out of verbal refuse—everyday phrases, repeated by all so many times in life that their communicative function becomes, at best, minimal. He works in a library and writes his poems line by line, or in paragraph-stanzas on separate index cards, like some catalog of life. Indeed, like so many book titles, each card contains most irredeemable banalities, of which every one informs that it stands for something that could be very instructive and profound were we to look up the book, or, in Rubinštejn's case, the context of our daily living in which we say those things. Here, for example, are a few such cards:

> 18. So, this is what I'm going to tell you.
> 19. You go ahead, I'll be right with you.
> 20. There's no need for these pitiful words.
> 21. All right now, show me your tongue!
> 22. So, are we going or are we not?
> 23. Thank you, I'm all right.
> 24. Wait, are you serious or not?
> 25. You know you cannot do this, either.

And so on, altogether 111 cards, of which the last fifteen are whole paragraphs telling an incoherent story about a pupil who "began to think" at the end of the paragraph. A sample:

> 100. The pupil asked the teacher: "May I leave? I have a bad headache." The teacher said: "All right, go. How come that you have a headache so often?" The pupil left and started thinking.
>
> 101. The pupil asked: "To dissolve in being or to dissolve in non-being — isn't it the same thing?" The teacher said: "I don't know." The pupil left and started thinking.[9]

Read in their sequence, these disjointed banalities began to appear to be telling a story — of our life, or the life of others, all enfolded between the statements — which we can only learn to read if we write it ourselves, according to our conscience and intelligence. Strange as it may seem, in this aspect of "non-communicative communication" Rubinštejn rather resembles Anton Čexov in his day.

I have not come across any Lithuanian poetry that would enter the cesspool of used-up language the way that Rubinštejn does. What there is instead might be called an effort to salvage the spent and marginal aspects of history. Caught between huge nations that struggle and triumph or struggle and perish, the Lithuanians seem to feel at times like flotsam and jetsam on the edge of the sea of history, a footnote of no great relevance to the onward march of humanity to whatever gates of heaven or hell. To survive, therefore, means to restore significance to the broken pieces of the past, and sometimes present, and the only way a poet knows how to make things meaningful again is to transform them into poetry. This, for example, is what Vytautas Bložė is doing in his collection *Polyphonies:*

> What have the generations left that lived before us
> dead clocks still show precisely the hours and the minutes
> when they stopped
> and what about us?
> we move, one conversation to another, with our own exactitude
> and make so many errors
> under the top hats, sweaty space now can be seen no more
> down in the capital of Gabon, where a civilized
> witch doctor stands, with his back against the last

wagon of the train that's gone, for all he's got now
are the footprints of white snow people
that lead from one bank safe into another
where, chiseled in the wall
the lengths of radio waves, cropped short and crumbling
are fading out — and now there is a silence on the sea
the tall ships stand stock still: the slave ships, ships of emigrants
from Lithuania, from my childhood, the sun
is hot upon their heads at harvest time, upon the waters.[10]

It cannot really be said that Bložė has retreated in his verse from the poetic idiom as traditionally understood. He has complex images here, and metaphors, and symbolic implications. He has, indeed even a philosophy of persistent hope that threads together these disjointed fragments from different times, places and people. What makes him in a special sense similar to Rubinštejn is the need for the reader to "write in" his own understanding and conscience so as to reveal a pattern of meaning, both universal and particular, that could establish the legitimacy of our seemingly marginal culture and aspiration in the mainstream of history.

One might say by way of conclusion that when it comes to style, a particular poetic idiom, or a deliberate lack of it, the Russian and Lithuanian poets, at least those mentioned here, do not really have much in common. What they do share is an alienation from the benevolent myth of the total state, a grim pity for the human and industrial trash it has produced and a yearning to endow the human language with new powers of resurrection, phoenix-like, from the trash heap of contemporary civilization.

1 *Zerkala.* Al'manach Vypusk I. Moskva: Moskovskij rabočij, 1989, p. 220.
2 Michael Epštejn "Koncepty ... Metaboly ... o novych javlenijax v poėzii." *Oktiabr,* No. 7, 1987, p. 195.
3 *Zerkala* p. 235.
4 "Kukučio galybė" in *Kukučio baladės,* Vilnius, 1977, pp. 48-9.
5 Vsevolod Nekrasov, *100 stichotvorenij.* Sostavil Gerald Janeček. Listy: 1987. Pages not marked.
6 Martinaitis, *Kukučio baladės.* Vilnius, 1977, pp. 48-9.
7 Nikolaj Karpov "Musorosžigatelnyj zavod." *Mosty,* No. 7, 1984, p. 49.
8 Stasys Anglickis, "Pabaigos aureolė," *Pergalė,* No. 12, 1989, p. 6.
9 The entire set is called "The Arrival of the Hero," and was written probably in 1985 or 1986. Both quotes are from a typescript copy — Rubinštejn, to my present knowledge, has not yet been published.
10 Vytautas Bložė, *Polifonijos,* Vilnius, Vaga, 1981, pp. 50-1.